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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon research and acquaints the reader with various aspects of the public self--the self interested in political and social issues. The document describes a study of how the public self was discovered. The data produced by this study resulted in the conclusion that to some degree all people have a public self. Most recognize there is a private self, but some do not seem to understand there is also a public self. Both states of being, public and private, seek expression in a location, at a time, and in activities that are distinctly different from each other. Through extensive interviews, examination of students' writings, and follow-up discussion with the students, the study gathered data from 20 students in the sixth-grade of two public schools in California. The study indicated that students in late elementary and middle school were already competently constructing public selves. Using student examples, the paper discusses defining the public self, where the public self has been, the public self in action, the public self related to political experience, speaking and acting, figuring the costs, the possibilities of the public self, and connecting gang activity to public self. The paper concludes that the public self requires understanding, nurturing, and support. The research study is appended. (Contains 16 references.) (EH)

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The Public Self: Taking a New Look at Civic Education

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The Public Self: Taking a New Look at Civic Education

Introduction

This is the story about how the public self was discovered. The reader is introduced to a study (Rettinger, 1992) that did not aim to find the public self. Nevertheless, the data produced by this study resulted in the conclusion that to some degree we all have a public self. While everyone recognizes that there is a private self, we do not seem to understand that we also have a public self. Both states of being, public and private, seek expression in a location, at a time and in activities that are distinctly different from each other. Additional research clarified, elaborated, and expanded the understanding of the public self, but much more needs to be done. Only now are the implications of the public self becoming increasingly clear. The purpose of this paper is to draw upon this research and acquaint the reader with these various aspects of the public self.

In the Beginning

Amanda, an African-American sixth-grade student, was relating her experience of living in a gang controlled neighborhood. She was talking about how her brother became

enmeshed in gang activity and was unable to break the gang bonds to finish school.

> What gives them the right? Nothing gives them the right. They just do it on their own. They think they are above the law. They don't care what the law says. They think they are the law . . .so they can make their own laws and everybody is supposed to abide by their laws.

Amanda was participating in a study (Rettinger, 1992) that aimed to find out how middle-school students construct political understandings, how they viewed themselves in political roles, how they would use instruments of power to change conditions they deemed undesirable, and how they sought connections to the larger world of social and political affairs. (For details of this study, please see Appendix A).

When I began the study, I was personally interested in these questions. At the time I did not consider the possibility that the data produced from this study might have a bearing on questions beyond those questions guiding the study. But there were intriguing hints that the findings were pertinent to questions, such as (1) why do students lack interest in courses

of history and government, (2) does this student disinterest bear a relationship later to voter apathy and also the dislike that most people express toward politics, and finally, (3) are we as teachers remiss if we do not make an effort to understand this disinterest and apathy.

I had experienced this disinterest and apathy of students. As high school social studies teacher for many years, I tried to teach lessons that would impart knowledge about the proper allocation of rights and responsibilities between the citizenry and the government. Along with other teachers I believed that students needed to understand "the basic concepts and values underlying our democratic political community and constitutional order" (Butts, 1988, p. 188).

However, there appeared to be areas of concern that were not covered or acknowledged by these concepts. For example, in civics classes teachers imbued students with the ideas that they, as citizens, were free and autonomous in what they chose to do or become. Their destiny depended upon their will, initiative and motivation. However, as these students continued their careers or education paths, they often contended with institutional structures that no one seemed to control or influence. Many of these institutions provided a framework that

caused the person to develop an alienated identity. The person might ask, "What difference does it make if one is autonomous and free, if there is no realm in which to exercise this freedom?"

Further complicating this situation, one noticed that governments at various levels, created to preserve and regulate the "constitutional order" seemed lacking and inadequate. Amanda's eloquent statement about gangs and the law attested to the fact that in some areas, people did not enjoy "constitutional order." Thus, when a power vacuum was created, individuals or groups coalesced to make and enforce their own laws. Since these laws favored the makers, the egalitarian intent of the law was lost. So again, the autonomy and freedom of the individual was inoperable. As another student remarked, "Rights don't work, when you have a gun to your head."

Our curriculum centering on the rights and responsibilities of citizens appeared to take no notice of the plight of the citizens who needed to understand these dynamic structures of force, influence, and power. More than that, they needed knowledge and experience in how a citizenry might confront these conditions and in how a person might contribute to the solutions of problems that seemed to fall through the cracks of

social and political networks.

Citizens did not lack exhortations to participate. This usually meant that one voted, paid taxes, served when necessary in the armed services. The problem was that few voted. Voting was not required by law, and failure to vote had no penalty attached to it. How could one justify a single vote as a tool to effect change? Office holders were elected with only a minority of voters voting. Special and partisan interests urged their supporters to vote with the result that elected officials represented these interests rather than the general welfare. The autonomous, free citizens who had never learned the advantages of joining and working together, were no match for organizations that had learned the art of combination.

Looking for Answers

While doing the analysis of the data from my study, I noticed that children only rarely mentioned either their relationship to the government or sought the remedy to problems by passing another law. Each child usually began with the affirmation of some belief. All children felt that efforts to achieve justice and fairness must be directed toward creating equality of treatment for all. There were differences in

individual interpretations. The boys tended to be more sensitive to unequal treatment given to people because of class differences, while girls stressed the importance of equality for people of different ethnic backgrounds and the equality of women and men.

The children also expressed intense feelings when talking about their aspirations. In many ways they wanted to achieve, to become knowledgeable, to know how to make a difference, to take charge and to work with others. They were asking to be involved in actual political experience. They were motivated by an inner moral force, not a duty required of them. Speaking and acting together characterized this activism. As Susan expressed it ,

> You want to make a difference, you have to speak out. That's basically how you get your rights (Rettinger, 1992).

What they thought, how they felt, and what they hoped to accomplish was the place to begin. Or stated another way, the students, themselves, were the pivotal points of reference. In each student, there was this pivotal point that I labeled the public self.

What Can Be Assumed about the Public Self?

Defining the public self, we note characteristic aspects of the public self:

-the public self seeks expression in a public area, a place where others gather and is freely open to all.

-the public self enters the public space and aims to connect with others by means of speaking and acting. In fact, political activity is defined as a variety of people speaking and acting together in public.

-the public self focuses on an issues or questions with a public object. The purpose is to speak and act on these issues with others and to promote some public good.

-the public self recognizes the intrinsic values of politics to the individual. Political activities render to the individual a sense of importance and worth, a sense of effectiveness and happiness not to be had in any other way.

-the public self is encouraged to examine his/her system of beliefs, consider the perspective of others, reflect on the outcome of possible actions, and use capacities for thought and judgment not required in other areas of living.

-the public self has opportunities in public pursuits for expressive, aesthetic, and heroic actions not available in private

pursuits. The public self can achieve what it means to become fully and completely human.

Where Has the Public Self Been?

Instances of the public self at work have been present all along. Numerous times individuals or small groups acted to alter or improve conditions in society that were unfair or dangerous to public safety. This work received attention, labeled at worst as busy-body interferers or at best as volunteerism or "do-gooders." No one seemed to recognized that this was political activity at its most basic level. The small groups could become large movements. We have known these movements under such titles as Civil Rights, Peace Movement, or the increase in Voter Franchise to women and minorities.

By contrast, popular culture has disregarded this public self and emphasized the private self. Advertisers exploited the private self's need for self-satisfactions and gratifications by ever-increasing consumption of goods. Though their materials wants and desires were satisfied, people often felt burdened, and isolated from others. Something was lacking that material objects could not satisfy. Because many individuals had not developed a public self, they could not know public happiness.

Hannah Arendt (1956), explaining the events of the American Revolution, provided an example of public happiness.

> .The Americans knew that public freedom consisted in having a share of public business, and that activities connected with this business by no means constituted a burden, but gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire no place else (p.119).

The Declaration of Independence refers to "the pursuit of happiness." The double meanings of happiness, public and private, have been clouded so that "the pursuit of happiness" has come to mean solely the pursuit of one's self interests. In education, we need to restore the place of the public self so that students can experience "public happiness."

The Public Self in Action

Janet, one of the students of the study, revealed a sense of developing public self. Janet was very concerned about atomic bombs. She voiced her feelings about this:

> We're not at peace yet. Some still want to blow up the world with the nuclear bomb, and we need to try and stop that. So we should go to someone, somewhere we thought would be the most important place to start with peace.

Janet, as a sixth-grade student, was beginning to develop her public self. She demonstrated the deep moral feelings that motivated her to speak out. She was impelled by these feelings to step away from obscurity of the private self to announce her beliefs in public. In the public realm her utterances received the scrutiny of others. This change from private to public self required some courage because it involved a certain amount of risk. The public realm in this case was an exchange with me as researcher. To give her utterances foundation, Janet presented her arguments.

> I'd say if you want to protect yourself, then the atomic bomb is not going to do it because they could go off, you know, and kill a lot of people. It could kill more people than if you protected yourself with something not as dangerous.

Janet did not distinguish between people who were enemies and were supposed to be killed or allies to be made more secure with the bomb. Accordingly, the bomb was as likely to kill the wrong people as well as the right people. The bomb destroyed indiscriminately. Janet made the astute judgment that greater amounts of force did not necessarily buy greater amounts of security. Where then does one begin to look for solutions? Janet explained her ideas.

> I think there's got to be a lot of people involved in it. I don't think one person can start peace in the world, but I think if you got a few people started, a few important important people. If you got enough people to go and tell and try to make peace, then maybe some people would listen.

Janet avoided the easy, seductive answer of force that promised to solve the problem quickly and opted instead for the way more difficult but more long-lasting. She would involve groups of people. She was aware that the voices of some people, "important people", carried more influence. But finally, she opted for numbers of people willing to involve themselves in

"going and telling and trying to make peace". Janet was proposing a political solution. The heart of this solution consisted of people meeting and speaking together in the public realm to find answers to a problem affecting everyone.

The public realm or public space, sometimes referred to as the space for appearance, is a location that is open to all. One can see and be seen. All who enter are equal. No one rules or is ruled, but the group that meets there may make rules to preserve the nature of this public space. This space allows for the expression of diversity among people. The location of this public space could be as varied as the classroom, the lecture hall, the street corner or the halls of a legislature.

As Janet demonstrated, the public self was willing to become active, leaving behind the obscurity and security of the private self. For Janet to continue the development of her public self, she needed a public space that was secure and could ensure the equality of all to speak and to be heard and responded to. But meeting together in the public space was not enough.

A public object that expressed questions or issues that held the attention of the participants was also required. Janet furnished this by her discussion of the nuclear bomb.

Additionally, her call for action was entirely appropriate. The public self wants to work actively on the solution, seeking methods and information that are appropriate.

One might speculate on what reception Janet's expressions would receive in the classroom We assume good learning conditions. Jane would have the opportunity to speak out about nuclear disarmament and an astute, sympathetic teacher would listen. Following Civitas (Quigley & Bahmueller, 1992), the teacher might conclude that Janet needed more information. This document states that

> Many citizens lack an adequate understanding of the core ideas of constitutional democracy. They need deeper knowledge of the American political system than is currently commonplace, both as a framework for judgment and as common ground for public discussion and virtuous and skillful participation.

The teacher missing the insights that Janet has revealed, might give her additional readings on the subject of nuclear disarmament. Janet, being a polite child, would have thanked her teacher but might feel that her teacher had not quite heard

what she said. Janet would be left with a small feeling of alienation.

However, understanding the importance of the public self, the teacher in addition to giving Janet the readings, could have helped her find the public space she needed to contact groups to read and discuss the materials with her. These groups might have been peer groups in her class or organized groups such as WAND, the members that are actively engaged in nuclear disarmament. Janet would have felt the teacher understood her concern. The mistake made by many educators is believing that "deeper knowledge" will inevitably lead to participation, not realizing that this requires a different understanding. Teachers feel they have discharged their responsibility and remark, "I gave the students the information. It's up to them to make use of it." This is not likely to happen. The public self is ignored.

The Public Self Related to Political Experience

The public self is developed by a person having a genuine political experience. Some people never have such an experience. Experiences, such as voting, paying taxes, supporting and obeying the laws, are deemed to be political

experiences. However, in carrying out these activities, citizens essentially remain separated and isolated from each other, A genuine political experience connects us to others.

To understand this phenomenon, consider the activities of Mr. Haskvitz' seventh grade class. What would happen if students were provided the stimulation and information they needed to write a law they believed was necessary? The seventh grade class of Mr. Alan Haskvitz noticed during a recent drought in California that school gardeners were using excessive amounts of water to keep non-native plants alive. In the words of Mr. Haskvitz, the following took place,

> The students wrote, lobbied, and helped pass legislation requiring the state of California to conserve water by using drought-tolerant landscaping. This project started when the students asked why the janitor was washing down the tennis courts at the neighboring school, They felt that since we were experiencing a drought that this was silly behavior. I contacted the the local water district, and they supplied important information from which the students started their research. They found, for example, that all the water the community used had to be imported

> from northern California. The project kept expanding, and the students became more interested in why, for example, water was cheaper than dirt in the desert community of Palm Springs. In the end the students flew to the state capital and presented their case before the legislature. It was well received and, according to water officials, saved the state millions of dollars and countless acre feet of water (Haskvitz, 1995)

All the important lessons the students had learned would include lessons in politics, in science and ecology, lessons in how to argue successfully to community leaders, lessons in governance in how to bring about change, lessons in cooperation and caring for the opinions of others. Perhaps the most significant change was in the students themselves. They felt effective in accomplishing some public good and a sense of joy and happiness experienced only in this way.

Speaking and Acting

Other benefits accrue to the person with an active public self. It seems reasonable that we think, form our opinions about right and wrong, determine what is real and not real by

ourselves. In fact our thinking, our opinions, our judgments, and our sense of reality must all be formed by speaking and acting with others. We don't do this by ourselves.

When we face a public issue or problem, we usually try to establish the truth. If we have the truth, we would be relieved of the task of making judgments. We would know what to do. However, many issues are not amenable to simple statements about what is the truth, such as should the United States invade Iraq and put an end to Saddam Hussein or should old growth redwoods be cut to provide wood for homes and save jobs. We must listen to the balanced opinions and judgments of many people. This multiperspective begins to alter what we originally thought. Taking in everything to be considered is a difficult task.

What we originally believed to be true begins to alter. Did we notice all the details? Did we see the problem correctly? Can we trust our sense perceptions to report what is actually there? We seek the reality of the situation by asking others what their views are. If we receive confirmation that others see things as we do, we are relieved and believe we are seeing things correctly. This reality seeking is a necessary part of becoming politically astute. Without it, we may become units of

population, thinking exactly alike. There are dangers when everyone begins to agree.

Charles, an African-American student living in the neighborhood with gang problems, was talking about the about procedures observed in court room dramas viewed on television. He was contrasting the way people in civil society solve disputes with how gangs act.

> If you get into a disagreement, you just talk about it. They (plaintiff and defendant) talk it out . . . by socializing with one another to agree on things . . . conversations to solve the case. Each tells his side of the story because they are going against each other and both sides of the story are different. Gangs are doing it physically, and the other way is socializing. Socializing is better, so we can get understanding about why did they do it (Rettinger, 1992).

Charles saw that to get better understanding, one must hear everyone's story. This constituted a reality check for his perceptions. Though he applies the term, "socializing" to this process, he renders a capable judgment as to it's benefits. The

gang, isolated in defense of turf, shows little tolerance for differences of opinions. As Charles tell us, "They won't listen, they just go do it, they don't care." This failure to communicate breeds a failure to care, which in turn threatens to tear apart the delicate web of agreements binding civil society together.

Just as our sense of reality increases by interchange with others, so also does our ability to think. As we depart from the group, our minds take over and become the group for us. Our minds permit us to assume the role of speakers and also of listening questioners. We carry on an internal dialogue with ourselves. We label this thinking.

Making reasoned judgments, seeking reality and learning to think are just some of the benefits to the active public self. What are the costs of our ignorance of the public self?

Figuring the Costs

We do not know how to figure costs of voter apathy and disinterest in political activities. However, the costs of gang activity to society are well documented. Gangs represent the failure of civil society to civilize youths.

The members of gangs are not solely responsible for about $1 billion spent annually to arrest, incarcerate, try youths

committing crimes in California (Report of League of Women Voters, 1996-7). But they contribute substantially to this figure. About a quarter of a million youths are arrested each year. The typical career in crime of these young people begins about the ages of 14 and 15. In addition to the cost of processing the crime itself, there is the high cost in broken lives and destroyed property, wherever these gangs are present. Citizens and police want to find solutions to these problems. Trying juveniles as adults and building more detention camps does appear to have an effect, since juvenile crime is not increasing. My judgment is that this misses the point. We need to find solutions that address the problems in a comprehensive manner.

The Possibilities of the Public Self

I was working with students in the Los Angeles Court Schools. These boys, ages 15 to 18, had been indicted and some convicted of murder, aggravated assault, robbery, car-jacking, to name a few. While I was observing in a classroom, a riot broke out. Two boys from rival gangs grimaced or stared at each other in a way to cause the other dishonor. This behavior is forbidden by the gang and had to be revenged. Soon books, chairs, and other movable objects were hurled through the air.

Other boys joined in, but others followed the school rule. This rule required students to duck under their desks and cover their heads. Members of the security staff were alerted. Two officers entered and pepper sprayed the room. Everyone began to cough and choke. The two miscreants were led away in handcuffs, while the rest of the class marched into the halls. I went to the office and requested that I be allowed to talk to the leaders of these two rival gangs. This took some time, but eventually six youths came into a room where we were meeting. They sat down at the table, arms folded, not looking at one another. Instead, they stared at the middle of the table. No one else was present in that room.

I told the boys that I was here doing research, learning about their situation, and that today we were going to talk about community. I started talking about communities I had lived in as a child. The mining town where my father worked provided us opportunities to put pennies and pins on the railroad tracks to find out what would happen when coal cars rolled over them. Another time, in a desert community the big event of the day was to go swimming in the town swimming pool.

As I continued to speak, I noticed that the boys began to relax a bit. I then invited them to tell about their communities.

Though it took some time, eventually each boy was contributing to the conversation. They talked about their families and their needs, the pleasures and the dangers existing there. Soon I was out of the conversation. They were comparing stories, giving each other information about community services. It became clear to me that they had never had the opportunity of being in a safe place, putting aside their rivalry and antagonisms and discussing their common problems. They found they had much in common, that they had similar problems, opinions, and experiences. At this point a rap on the door indicated the session was over and the probation officer was about to enter. All the boys stiffened. As the officer opened the door, I asked for five more minutes. He closed the door. The boys looked at me. No one must know that they had spoken to each other, let alone they had actually shared and communicated with one another. They must show no friendship toward each other once they had left the room. What had occurred must be kept secret. I assured them that I would honor their confidentiality, but I also told them that I was very sad that they could not continue to build on this experience and learn ways to change the conditions and the neglect of their communities.

Connecting Gang Activity to the Public Self

As gang members, boys and some girls show the ability to recruit and organize groups of youths, make rules and enforce them, patrol territories to keep them inviolate from the depredations of other youths, and run a business, even though it is illegal. All of this they learn on their own or from each other or older gang members. These are skills, however, that used for a better purpose could work for society rather than against if teachers and parents knew how to help the student develop a public self.

Interviewing the members of gangs, I have discovered that gangs are lining up recruits even in the fourth or fifth grade. The older gang member, usually a student a few years older, will begin to pay attention to the younger potential recruit. This is very exciting for the younger boy or girl.

This courting process continues throughout the next few grades, until the potential member is in the seventh grade. During this time they are given the "rules". Now the person, thirteen or fourteen years, is most likely asked to make a commitment. Considering what the gang offers, the prospective member is convinced to join unless there is some strong countervailing argument against it. The gang offers instant

friends and connections. These connections can be depended on for advice, security, and mentoring. The youth now has a greater role in what is going on and protection. By becoming a gang member, it is exciting to break with the rules of teachers and parents and make the rules for oneself.

Gangs are often viewed as a substitute for a dysfunctional family. While there may be some truth to this, many gang members have functioning families who have jobs or small businesses that support the family and live in solid working class neighborhoods. Instead, the gangs make use of the young boy's desire to take part, to have a say, to decide affairs in the larger community. In short they encourage the person to develop a public self.

Based on the data collected, I believe that if schools, especially early elementary grades, developed strong programs helping the child to connect with others and take an interest to community affairs and learn to take initiative in correcting problems within their levels of maturity, this would give children alternatives to gangs and many would opt not to join the gang. This program cannot be an occasional teacher doing it, but should include a system-wide effort to follow such a program through elementary and middle school. The program should not

be limited to gang areas, but also needs to be instituted in schools without gangs.

Gang members have told me in interviews that they did not understand the whole picture when they joined the gang. Instead of security, they found the distance they could travel safely might be a few blocks. Instead of freedom to discuss what the gang should do, they were given rigid rules to follow and required to carry out duties that were in conflict with their sense of morality. There could be no questions or discussions. These duties might include beating someone, shooting in a drive-by, or robbing a helpless person or selling an illegal substance. They found they could not get out of the gang without endangering their lives. In addition, if they were caught by the police, the gang just faded away and gave the member no further support.

Gangs as a Part of Mass Society

This report is not centered on simply the problems of gangs. However, gangs, like cancer, indicate unhealthy conditions throughout the body as the basis for the disease. Part of the problem is that we all live in a mass society. Individuals in mass society become units of population thinking

more or less alike. Differences in perspective are replaced by one mind set. It may be highly unpopular or even dangerous for one to have a difference of opinion from other group members. Since everyone thinks much alike, one has no need to speak one's thoughts or listen to others. There is an end to "the inexhaustible richness of human discourse" (Parekh, 1981). The public space is reserved for one person who can speak and act for all. The gang member who joined hoping to have a say, now cannot express an opinion.

When diversity of perspective is absent, reality cannot be accurately determined and therefore becomes distorted. The effect is that the group shares a distorted reality. Because the groups' beliefs are distorted and not part of the common sense expressed by others, the group tends to become defensive and isolated from others because they are different. This happens to the gangs and in turn may encourage extreme or dangerous delusions. Thus the cost of isolation is alienation. Alienation and loneliness are the marks of our age. To achieve a connection to the world of people, groups may opt to commit violent, antisocial acts. This connection between alienation and violence is noticeable in gangs, extremist cults or nationalist groups. This century Nazi Germany has become the preeminent example,

but today we note other cases of this phenomenon.

Conclusions

We began our discussion with the possibility that the data of the study cited had some bearing on three questions posed at the beginning. The first, why do so many students lack interest in courses of history and government, can at least in part be attributed to the fact that students have capacities that we fail to support. I propose that these capacities are those of the public self. Since teachers' concentration is on the dissemination of knowledge, it is difficult to consider how to engage all those capacities. Students, feeling they are essentially ignored and seeing themselves as simply repositories for this knowledge, are understandably apathetic and outright hostile to the subject matter. They feel no effort is made to connect them to others or to the world of human affairs.

Second, while it is difficult to pin the whole cause of voter apathy and disinterest in political affairs on education's failure to recognize the public self, certainly this omission results in the fact that most people do not know they have a public self. The public self is underdeveloped by most people, and this results in a political culture that is weak and impoverished, unable to

achieve a strong, vigorous democracy.

Third, as social studies educators, are we remiss? We should at least know what we are about. However, periodicals and books on the teaching of social studies will attest to the fact that there are large areas of confusion (Angell A. V. [1991], Gehrke, N. J., Knapp, M. S. & Sirotnik K. A. [1992], Lipset, C. M. [1995]. McNeil, L. M. [1986], Newmann, F.M., Bertocci, T. A. & Landness, R. M. [1977], Oliner, P. [1983]) . The thinkers, who are most sure of what social studies means, are those who write the National Standards for Government and Civics (1994). Their statements are unequivocal. "The goal of education in civics and government is informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy" They've got that right. But if we read correctly, "Their (students) effective and responsible participation requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge and of intellectual and participatory skills" (p. 1). In this the writers err because participation is not going to occur automatically as a result of " acquisition of a body of knowledge" strung together with "intellectual and participatory skills" (p. 1). If this is the connection these curriculum leaders intended to make, then they leave educators with no structure

on which to build "Effective and responsible participation (that is) also furthered by development of certain dispositions or traits of character that enhance the individual's capacity to participate in the political process . . .". Something is missing. We have given very little attention to the development of "certain dispositions or traits of character." We turn and listen to the children to find out what it is. They tell us that someone needs to pay attention to what is required for them to grow competent public selves. They have public selves that require understanding, nurturing and support.

Appendix A

The study reported here strongly indicated that students in the late elementary and middle school were already competently constructing public selves. The organization and analysis of the data gathered from the students were guided by the following questions representing the students' voices:

What do I believe and value?

What do I want to achieve or accomplish?

What's wrong with the world?

How can I do what I wish to do?

This research was carried out in two schools in two culturally and economically diverse communities. The author located in each school 10 sixth-grade students, deemed by their teachers to represent the average abilities of that grade level. Five boys and five girls attended Lincoln School (fictitious title) situated in the the less-affluent community with a working class population and a mixture of Mexican-American, African-American, and Anglo groups. Six girls and four boys attended Fair Acres (fictitious title), situated in the more affluent community with a population of Anglos and Asia-American professionals, as well as some Mexican-American and African-

American groups.

The kinds of problems the children chose to solve differed in the two communities. For example, boys and girls in Lincoln School were concerned mostly with the immediate community. Problems of dysfunctional families, gangs, crime, and drugs were of primary importance to these children. The children of Fair Acres were more concerned with global problems of war, terrorism, degradation of the global environment and unequal treatment based on race or gender.

To find out the depth and extent of the children's awareness and attitudes concerning social and political issues, the author interviewed each child individually three times over a period of two years under conditions conducive to the spontaneous expressions of beliefs and ideas. To provide a basis for each interview, the students were asked to write an essay answering either of two questions provided by the California Assessment Program for sixth-grade social studies. In the first question, the children were asked to explain how they thought two laws in the ancient kingdom of Hammurabi differed from those we have today. The first law stated that if you broke the arm or leg of a noble, yours would be broken likewise in return. The second law said that if you broke the arm or leg

of a peasant, or poked out his eye, you would have to pay one mina, (about $25).

The second question dealt with the three obediences of Confucius, and stated first, that a girl must obey her father; second, that as a wife she must obey her husband; and third, as a widow, she must obey her son. Again, the children were asked how the situation for women in Confucius' China was the same or different from today.

Both of these questions could be interpreted in several different ways. For example the Hammurabi question confronts the child with two types of punishments different in severity depending not on the kind of crime committed but on ones position in society. The class system becomes the gauge of punishment, the crime itself becomes secondary. Is this just and fair? The Confucius question, on the other hand, deals with the issue of power over others, and questions of dependency. Obedience to laws extrinsic to oneself is a question that brings into question issues of power relationships within society below the level of formal government. The author anticipated that these essays would reveal children's ideas about governance and the fairness of the law and also how they sensed their effectiveness in independently taking control of their own lives

in order to contribute to the community.

The interviews began with the students being asked to expand on their essays. Replies disclosed an unexpected maturity and sociopolitical awareness, which had the ripple effect of generating more questions and leading to more answers reflecting the child's life experiences and views of society. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories and properties were identified and organized into basic themes. Patterns of individual students were charted. The total group's responses both were summarized in tabular form to reveal similarities, differences, and anomalies as to gender and class (See Rettinger, p. 59-82).

The data showed that with the opportunity to affiliate, to speak, and to act, the children were developmentally able to construct a public self, to project their uniqueness and individuality, and to connect their meanings to their concerns for society. The words of the children answered the questions: <u>What can I know or believe?</u> focused on themes of equality, justice, and plurality; <u>What may I hope?</u> included aspirations and the notion of speaking together to test reality; <u>What ought I to do?</u> framed paradigms of power in language children knew.

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